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ABSTRACT

The assumption for many college professors is that academic discourse is a hallmark of the educated, a form of communication accepted and expected both academically and professionally. Typically, academic discourse entails the conventions of a particular discipline's writing form. A writing center tutor and administrator must find ways to teach both grammatical correctness and the terms that explain classroom concepts. This is necessary for students to develop the writing strategies that will help them succeed in class and satisfy the expectations of colleagues across campus who expect clear writing as a component of academic success. Determining purpose and assessing what a student has produced provide a starting point for considering strategies that might improve writing clarity. In the writing center, the writing tutor can provide valuable modeling for the student by presenting the language to interpret assignment directions, and the tutor can model recognized terminology to help a student understand more complex concepts. The tutor is continually providing the language of academic discourse for the student to begin using to identify what he/she has already been doing. Linda Flower reinforces the pattern of working from student input. "Playing with your thoughts" is a process which can include brainstorming, staging a scenario, or even playing out an analogy. Those students who come empty-handed to a writing tutor often have not thought seriously about the assignment other than as a chore to complete. Students can best be inspired by showing the relevance of learning to their situations. Empowering a student by validating a powerful account is one way of making writing relevant. (NKA)

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Practicing Academic Discourse with the Developing Writer: The Role of the College Writing Center.

by Barbara Beaupre

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CS 217 388

Barbara Beaupre

Practicing Academic Discourse with the Developing Writer: The Role of the College Writing Center

While instructors seek to help students succeed, faculty and administrators do not always agree as to how this goal can be accomplished. Nor do they agree on what constitutes academic discourse. David Bartholomae says students have to "appropriate a specialized discourse" (273) as though they were members of the academy, finding some compromise between personal history, convention, and the history of a discipline. In many cases the problem boils down to a conflict between student voice and acquired language patterns that differ from the mechanically correct language presumed to be a part of academic discourse. We know there is a considerable difference in the words we casually speak and the words used in college classrooms. How can we encourage our students to express ideas in a language that captures their environment and still maintain the clarity of language valued as academic discourse? Writing center tutors offer students a unique opportunity to improve their writing through guided questioning and discussion that is not usually possible in a classroom situation. If the challenge for college English instructors is to help students from diverse backgrounds cross the bridge from social communication to academic discourse, then, today's college writing centers can make important contributions in helping students succeed.

The assumption for many college professors is that academic discourse is a hallmark of the educated. It is a form of communication that is accepted and expected both academically and professionally. Typically, academic discourse entails the

conventions of a particular discipline's writing form. Students begin to engage cognitively with their disciplines and their writing reflects a language shared by those who teach them. As writing teachers we know that along with helping students to generate ideas, and examine the thinking of others, a level of grammatical correctness is certainly an expectation for the so-called "educated" in society. As a writing center tutor and administrator, I must find ways to teach both grammatical correctness and the terms that explain classroom concepts. This is necessary for our students to develop the writing strategies that will help them succeed in the classroom as well as satisfy the expectations of colleagues across campus who expect clear writing as a component of academic success.

Muriel Harris reminds us that there are no pat teaching strategies that work for all students. Rather, there are multiple ways to reach students. Writing Center tutors, because they work one-on-one with students have the opportunity to personalize a student's writing experience through discussion. By questioning, and looking at a student's example, the tutor can determine how closely the student's thoughts were captured in their writing. Determining purpose and assessing what a student has produced provide a starting point for considering strategies that might improve writing clarity. This is what Harris refers to as "ongoing diagnosis."

The idea of ongoing diagnosis is a key consideration, particularly when working with developmental writers whose needs are so varied. Many students come to writing center tutors halted by the very idea of starting a writing assignment. They may have briefly read the assignment, but their lack of familiarity with academic language make the directions a mystery too difficult to decode. In this instance, the writing tutor provides

valuable modeling for the student by providing the language to interpret the assignment directions. Having the student read the directions aloud and explain what is expected are the first steps in helping a student grapple with deciphering a new language. As with any language, only practice will make the language of academic discourse part of the student vocabulary. We need to act in ways that invite student participation: giving eye contact, voicing interest, and asking questions. Maureen Neal reminds us (88) that talk is more easily generated and responded to than writing. If we engage our students in conversation and practice the words that are unfamiliar with them, students can "try on" the words in a risk free manner. The "trying on" of words is part of the acquisition of any new language.

"Trying on" new language can take many forms. Just as students don't always recognize a messy room when they have one, they don't notice a disorganized paragraph or essay. In the same context, just as when a parent cleans a child's messy room, the child assumes the parent will take care of the room. Similarly, a tutor who cleans and organizes a paper assumes responsibility for that paper. Instead, tutors can model recognized terminology to help a student understand more complex concepts. For example, a paragraph with too many different items in it is like storing silverware next to a toothbrush. It doesn't belong because it isn't organized. Most students of whatever age or background can grasp a concept if the terms used to explain it are in words they find familiar. Once they understand the concept, they are more likely to put it into effect.

The strategy of providing academic words related to recognized concepts is a practice called interdiscursive linking. The linking describes the way developing writers acquire new patterns of discourse by comparing or contrasting the features of the

discourse they are trying to acquire with those of discourses they have already mastered. The idea sounds strikingly similar to scaffolding, a much used buzzword in education. Though the concept may not be new, the application of this concept to adult developing writers gives college writing teachers more incentive to tap into prior student writing experience. Whether that experience is jotting down memos at work, writing letters, or scribbling notes, it provides a starting point for student connection to academic writing.

The task for the instructors of developing writers is to work from what is established, particularly in a writing center. The tutor is continually providing the language of academic discourse for the student to begin using to identify what he or she has already been doing. The student can begin to name a used activity and practice it intentionally. For example, telling a student that the scribbled notes the student has used to start the assignment are a necessary step in prewriting can empower the student and help her see that though she may not have had the terminology to describe her activity, she was already on the right track. Fear and intimidation of academic writing are often in place for developmental writers. This modeling and practice with academic terminology offers familiarity, making it easier to use. In a classroom setting, a student may be reluctant to offer an opinion because he feels inadequate to express what he has no name for. With a tutor, the student is given an opportunity to hear a new term, to comment on it, and to understand how his behavior relates to it. Pointing out that established patterns are part of a recognized strategy can validate a student's effort and promote confidence. The student is more apt to take a risk with the language of academic discourse because a supportive tutor can reduce the weight of authority often imposed by an instructor who assigns grades.

Linda Flower reinforces the pattern of working from student input. One of her strategies for generating ideas includes the process of "playing your thoughts." This process can include brainstorming, staging a scenario or even playing out an analogy; such as what does this topic make you think of? The tutor helps the developing writer generate his own information through continual questioning. The process can be extended by an astute tutor who looks for cue words that tap into a network of associations and ideas. To accomplish this successfully, the tutor must have a working knowledge of the writing process and a sincere desire to help students discover their ideas. The focus of the conversation must be the writer's thoughts and helping that writer find words to put his/her thoughts into written form. When the writer lacks the vocabulary, the tutor can help by supplying a word, but the ideas behind the words belong to the writer. In this case the process for acquiring academic discourse is first oral, gradually shifting to written. The process between tutor and student is collaborative.

A successful tutor keeps the focus of the conversation directed to the student's ideas. It is imperative that as writing teachers and tutors we recognize that the goal of our teaching is to help our students put their ideas on paper. Emotional turmoil and certainly a sense of frustration can result when the elite language of the university contradicts the language that binds together family and friends. Our role as writing teachers is to help students connect personally with what they are writing. That can only happen when they see a link between what they are discussing in the classroom and their lives outside the classroom.

Those students who come empty-handed to a writing tutor often haven't thought seriously about the assignment other than as a chore to complete. They may be confused

by the assignment directions and have no idea what the instructor and in this case audience expects. If academic discourse is the language of thinkers, then, we must stimulate our students to interact with the ideas that are part of their assignments and give them examples of how the information fits into their current experience. To accomplish this task involves translating academic terms into words that make sense to the writer. . Words like "summary" and "analysis" that many instructors take as givens must be discussed and explained. Tutors have the obvious opportunity to rehearse and explain these new terms with a student in a nonjudgmental context.

Practicing academic terminology is a preliminary step in acquiring academic language. Students must also be connected to reading material that is meant to stimulate their thinking. Alan Devenish writes of using classic Greek dramas to engage his community college English students. While these students are squeezing in an English class between a home, family, and full time job, the need to connect to the universal experiences of finding truth and honor amidst human weakness is still valid. Devenish writes how the transformation from academic agenda to personal meaning occurs when students because of an assignment "slow down and engage in language in ways unknown to their hurried, short-term, needs-driven lives" (411). How does Devenish engage his students in Greek drama, a subject so seemingly far removed from our frantic urban existence? Not only does he pair his Greek dramas with more contemporary writing such as Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, a novel set in colonial Nigeria, he reminds students that the deeds done in the tragedies have their everyday counterparts in contemporary society. The supermarket tabloids and talk show topics of incest, self-mutilations and suicides which feature the fears and secrets least admissible in our

normal, public lives are discussed and portrayed in Greek drama in a fashion that shows the complexity of human experience.

What I liked most about Devenish's article isn't simply that he is using a variety of texts to engage his students. Rather, Devenish helps students connect to academic discourse by tapping into a framework of their experience that already exists. He does this by creating dialogues for students to interact with the texts. One way he showed this was a preparation exercise for Oedipus. He asked students to respond to a prompt that described the following scenario.

You're at a party. At some point a drunk shouts out that the people you think are your parents are not your real parents. The next day you ask your parents about your origin. They reassure you, but something still nags and you consult someone who is reputed to have special powers of knowledge and sees into the future. You ask this person about your parents and are told only that it is your fate to kill one parent and marry the other. What do you do now?

Whether students recognize the scenario as part of the Oedipal drama or not, the question now becomes one that can be considered on a personal level. Imagining ones' self in such a situation is the beginning of generating ideas related to a 2500 year-old drama. The key issue is stimulating student thinking and practicing reflection. Many of our students come to the community college classroom with little experience interacting with a text. As instructors, we supply the terminology for ideas that may be floating around without an identity to connect them to what is often perceived as another unapproachable world.

Joseph Ng sees teachers as cultural agents. He accomplishes this by what he describes as "a negotiation between down sizing the authoritarian literary expert and inviting active voices" (419). He speaks of relating his own experiences as a Chinese born educator to connect to his students. It is not necessary to be an ethnic instructor to relate our response to a piece of writing. In teaching ethnic literature to returning adults students in downtown Los Angeles, I may have been the only white person in the classroom, but I shared numerous life experiences with my students. Telling how I responded to a text opened the way for my students to share their own experiences. When we discussed "The World of Our Grandmothers" Connie Young Yu, I told my students how different my mother's life was from my own. This was a starting point for discussion and connection from personal experience to literature. When reminded of the common thread of so many of our life experiences, students are freed to express what they know. When they begin to connect their life experience to the ideas covered in literature, they can begin practicing academic discourse.

The idea of making connections between our own experience and the experience of those in literature is at the heart of academic discourse. We ask our students to read a story and pull out what is valuable. In so doing, we want them to make these connections with the terms and phrases that we use in a classroom setting. We want those common words of academic communication to become part of a practiced and useful vocabulary. What is typically valuable to most readers is the familiar chord that a writer is able to touch. I start my students out with connecting to short stories by pointing out similarities to family experience. Sandra Ciscernos in "Only Daughter" paints a graphic picture of growing up female in a Hispanic home dominated by males. When students are

introduced to terms such as "gender bias," their own experience can be viewed from a new perspective, simply by the ability to identify a previously unlabeled situation. Students need to be reminded of this, usually with a specific example. After identifying a common experience, it doesn't take students long to attach an underlying meaning to the behavior. Practicing the pattern of making connections with a broader idea in mind, such as personal freedom, harassment, or power is key to preparing students to examine the ideas of others. Reflection and critical thinking don't automatically happen. Students need the opportunity to engage in these activities, find value in them and then do them intentionally.

Simplifying a complex concept with a recognized experience not only helps our students to make connections, it can validate their own ideas. The issue is particularly significant to developing writers since they typically lack both confidence in their writing and reinforcement for their ideas. If we think of education and the teaching of writing as empowering our students, validation of their ideas is critical. As teachers of writing we must take care not to make form and usage the focal point of our comment least we dismiss and extinguish the emotion expressed. At the same time we must model the terms and examination techniques that will bridge the gap between street jargon and academic discourse. This is no small task, but we need to acknowledge the importance so our student can do the same.

As I visited various academic departments on my community college campus, I heard remarks such as "I'm so glad there is finally a writing center. Now you can help my students clean up their sentences." One instructor from anthropology questioned me as to whether the writing center could teach his students how to write scientific reports

according to his directions." Even after explaining the role of writing center tutors as helping students practice the writing process, the expectation of many of our faculty is the writing center is a fix-it shop. This simple reduction in the explanation of what constitutes academic writing exemplifies the split within our institutions as to what academic writing is and how it should be fostered. Is it our job to assist students in becoming models of academic discourse, confident in their use of commas and standard white English? While this expectation is part of what many consider academic discourse, a more important consideration is including those previously excluded from the academic and professional rewards of clear writing and supported thinking. Writing decisions as negotiation rather than commands are the difference between empowerment and prescribed writing. Collaborative decisions based on what is acceptable in a particular context is a democratic approach that includes students and helps illuminate the realities of writing for a particular audience.

We can best inspire students by showing the relevance of learning to their situations. Empowering a student by validating a powerful account is one way of making writing relevant. There is no one method or technique to reach any student. Academic writing includes a variety of styles and forms and can be explained in a variety of ways. As teachers and tutors, we need to bridge the language gap between our students' spoken language and academic discourse. If it sounds like I am suggesting that we act as interpreters and guides, I am. Students come to us to make changes in their lives. We can help provide the vocabulary and practice for them to express their spoken thoughts effectively on paper and more importantly, we can foster an atmosphere of validation and collaboration that honors what our students bring to our classrooms.

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